

ISIS and Wilayat Sinai: Complex Networks of Insurgency under Authoritarian Rule

Ashour, Omar

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Arbeitspapier / working paper

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Ashour, O. (2016). *ISIS and Wilayat Sinai: Complex Networks of Insurgency under Authoritarian Rule*. (DGAP kompakt, 15). Berlin: Forschungsinstitut der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik e.V.. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-54270-3>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Deposit-Lizenz (Keine Weiterverbreitung - keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

Terms of use:

This document is made available under Deposit Licence (No Redistribution - no modifications). We grant a non-exclusive, non-transferable, individual and limited right to using this document. This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All of the copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.

ISIS and Wilayat Sinai **Complex Networks of Insurgency under Authoritarian Rule**

Omar Ashour

This paper aims to explain the complex relationship between ISIS and the armed group Wilayat Sinai (WS), based in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. After a short overview of the historical developments in the peninsula that, starting in the early 1980s, led to the gradual escalation of the crisis there, the paper examines the military capacity of WS from 2014 to 2016. It describes the impact of local and regional sociopolitical factors and resources and examines how WS's links with ISIS affect its military capacity. The paper concludes with general observations and policy implications for Europe and Germany in particular.

The Transformation of a Local Insurgency

"Give the good news to [Abu Baker] al-Baghdadi.... Give the good news to the caliph of the believers. Victory is coming. And we are your soldiers, God willing," said a masked insurgent in a distinct north Sinai accent on October 24, 2014, after successfully destroying the military checkpoint of Karam al-Qawadis.¹ The insurgents had seized a large number of weapons after a twin attack on heavily armed military positions in Sheikh Zuweid and El-Arish. During fighting, they killed more than thirty soldiers, destroyed an American-made M-60 Patton Tank and an M-11 armored vehicle, and seized heavy mortars and heavy machine guns from the military. The masked commander's video statement was the clearest indicator at the time that Egypt's strongest armed organization – Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (Supporters of Jerusalem, or ABM), which had spearheaded the insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula since early 2010 – was joining the organization Islamic State (ISIS). The latter had already declared a "caliphate" on June 29, 2014.

On November 10, 2014, the affiliation with ISIS became official. "The caliphate has been declared in Iraq and al-Sham [parts of the Levant], and the Muslims have chosen

a caliph who is the grandson of the best of humans. If that is the case, we have no choice but to heed the invitation of God's caller.... We therefore pledge religious-political loyalty to Caliph Ibrahim ibn Awad ibn Ibrahim al-Qurayshi al-Husayni." That month, ABM changed its name to Wilayat Sinai (Sinai Province of the Islamic State, or WS).

The statement, which was disseminated by ABM/WS's media section, was likely spoken by the organization's commander, Abu Osama al-Masri. It put an end to conflicting statements issued by ABM/WS-affiliated media outlets. An earlier statement, issued on November 3, 2014, had declared allegiance to ISIS and called on the "brothers in the Land of the Quiver [Egypt], Libya, Gaza, and all Maghreb and Mashreq countries" to declare loyalty to ISIS. But on November 4, 2014, a tweet denying the oath and challenging the authenticity of the first statement was published by one of two Twitter accounts that regularly disseminate ABM's statements. The two conflicting declarations reflected internal divisions within the group that will be discussed in greater detail below. The dispute

was about swearing allegiance to ISIS or preserving the group's informal affiliation with and ideological affinity to Al Qaeda, especially its post-2011 modified strategy of mixing political violence with social services in an attempt to win popular support.

The significant military rise of ABM/WS and its complex relationship with ISIS are somewhat puzzling. The organization has persisted, and even grown, despite almost five years of successive Egyptian counterinsurgency campaigns. These campaigns escalated and intensified after September 2013, becoming extremely brutal but at the same time quite ineffective. As a result, the Sinai-based insurgency was able not only to endure but also to expand its geographical scope, tactical military capacity, operational intensity and durations, regional scale, quality of propaganda and communications, and existential legitimacy.

Over the last 15 years, even before the official establishment of ABM/WS, the insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula has mutated significantly. Its stated goal changed from supporting Palestinian armed organizations in the early 2000s to controlling areas in northeast Sinai and attempting to defeat the Egyptian regime's security and military forces there, while declaring transnational loyalties (namely to ISIS) in late 2014. Additionally, it fought to avenge deaths that occurred during government crackdowns in the aftermath of the July 2013 military coup against former President Mohammed Morsi as well as to weaken these forces in areas away from Sinai.

This paper aims to explain the complex relationship between ABM/WS and ISIS and to examine its implications for the former. After a short overview of the historical developments that starting in the early 1980s led to the gradual escalation of the crisis in Sinai, it examines the military capacity of WS from 2014 to 2016 and addresses how sociopolitical factors and resources have an impact on that capacity. It also examines how links with ISIS affect WS's military capacity. The paper concludes with general observations and policy implications for Europe and Germany in particular.²

Historical Overview: The Making of Wilayat Sinai (1982–2014)

The political, social, structural, security, and humanitarian dimensions of the Sinai crisis go back to the aftermath of the Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula in 1982. Egyptian security and social policies since then have essentially framed Sinai as a threat rather than an opportunity. Consequently, the resident of Sinai has been cast as a potential informant, potential terrorist, potential

spy, and/or potential smuggler rather than a full Egyptian citizen. In a 2005 US State Department cable published by Wikileaks, a senior Egyptian police official in Sinai told a visiting American official delegation that “the only good Bedouin in Sinai was the dead Bedouin.”³

The policies based on this perception escalated in the aftermath of the second Palestinian intifada in 2000. Several Egyptian security bureaucracies – principally the State Security Investigations (SSI, now renamed the National Security Apparatus), and the General Intelligence Apparatus – believe that during the second intifada several Palestinian militant groups in Gaza received direct logistical support from northeast Sinai. Since then the main, consistent feature of Egyptian policy toward the region has been a mix of repression and efforts to coopt selected tribal leaders into providing useful intelligence.

In October 2004, the simultaneous bombings of tourist resorts in Taba and Nuweiba brought about further escalation. The SSI had almost no information about the terrorists and therefore conducted a wide crackdown in northeast Sinai. With the help of the Central Security Forces (CSF), the SSI arrested around three thousand people. They took women and children related to suspects hostage until the suspects surrendered. “They electrocuted us in the genitals for hours before asking any questions. The torture continued during and after the interrogations. Many of the young men swore revenge,” said a former detainee.⁴

In July 2005, a second wave of bombings hit Sharm el Sheikh. This time, an organization declared responsibility for the attacks: Al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad fi Sayna' (Monotheism and Struggle in Sinai, or TJS). The group was inspired by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's organization in Iraq, but despite the Iraqi inspiration, most of its leaders and members were locals.⁵ The founder, Khaled Musa'id, was a dentist from El-Arish City and a member of al-Swaraka tribe, the largest and one of the most influential tribes in Sinai. He was killed in a firefight with the CSF on September 28, 2005. Ten years later, in September 2015, ABM/WS paid tribute to him as a founder in a 37-minute documentary entitled “Soldiers' Harvest.” Indeed, the main contribution of Musa'id and his men was transforming an ideological current found in books and speeches into a real organizational structure, with a leadership hierarchy and multiple cells in five cities/towns within three regions: northeast Sinai (al-Arish, Rafah, Sheikh Zuweid), central/central-east Sinai (Halal Mountain/Nekhel), and Ismailia City.

A second wave of crackdowns began right after the 2005 bombings. Many suspected TJS members and sympathizers as well as their relatives, acquaintances, and neighbors were arrested. “We met them in prison. Most

of them did not know anything about ideology, theology, or jurisprudence. Some were illiterate, and we had to teach them how to read,” said a former Islamist detainee who was imprisoned with the “Sinai group,” as they were known at the time. “All that the actual TJS members had studied were three booklets written by Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi,” he said, referring to a famous Jordanian jihadist ideologue, “and this led them to use *takfir* a lot.”⁶

The Sinai detainees were mainly distributed in six prisons: Damanhur, Highly Guarded (known as the Scorpion), Abu Za’bal, Liman Tora, New Valley, and Natrun Valley. From 2004 to 2009, they interacted in those prisons with former jihadists who had abandoned and disowned armed activism. SSI made it possible for the Islamic Group (IG), several former leaders of the organization al-Jihad, and independent Salafi figures to give them lessons in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), creed (*‘aqida*), and the “revisions literature” produced by the IG and others in their post-jihadist phase, thinking it would provide a fruitful counter-narrative to jihadism. It partly worked. In prisons, some of the TJS members abandoned the core jihadi belief that armed action is the sole theologically legitimate, instrumentally effective method for social and political change.⁷ Others did not and were more interested in avenging their humiliation and repression. This was notably the case with Kamal Allam, one of WS’s current military commanders.⁸

In pre-2011 Sinai, the environment was significantly changing. A 2007 conflict in Gaza between factions of Hamas and Fatah and a 2009 crackdown by Hamas on Salafi jihadists drove both former Fatah’s Preventive Security officers and members of Jund Ansar Allah (Soldiers of the Supporters of God) and their sympathizers into northeast Sinai to escape the crackdowns.

By late 2009, jihadists began to regroup in different organizational structures. Al-Tahwid wa al-Jihad – Bayt al-Maqdis (Monotheism and Struggle: Jerusalem) issued a booklet on November 17, 2009 entitled “This is Our Creed.”⁹ It did not differ much from the theological booklets issued by the Islamic State in Iraq at that time to support its ideological version of jihadism. The group Ansar al-Sunnah fi Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis (Supporters of the Sunnah near Jerusalem) issued a series of propaganda videos documenting operations against Israeli military and civilian targets between April and August 2010. By late 2010, individuals and factions from these small groups had merged to become ABM, which became the most active and centralized armed organization in Sinai, among at least three other active groups or networks.¹⁰

Between late 2010 and late 2013, ABM was focusing primarily on attacking Israeli civilian and military targets. But Egyptian police stations and security headquarters were also attacked in January, February, and July 2011, partly to avenge the crackdowns of 2004–06 as well as to capture weapons. Sinai’s uprising against Hosni Mubarak’s regime combined both popular mobilization and armed reprisals on security forces. And by early February 2011, security forces had fled both the towns of Rafah and Sheikh Zuweid.

In response, two major counterinsurgency operations were launched by the Egyptian government between 2011 and 2013: Eagle 1 (under the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, or SCAF) and Eagle 2 (under President Mohammed Morsi). Both operations failed to quell the insurgency and in many ways seemed to be a continuation of previous policies, rather than marking a new counterinsurgency approach.

The July 2013 military coup against Morsi and the August 2013 crackdowns on pro-Morsi and anti-coup protestors in Rabaa Square and Nahda Square in Cairo had a major impact on Sinai. “We knew torture was on its way. It was just a matter of time,” said one of the residents of Sheikh Zuweid who had been detained in 2004 for a few months.¹¹ In August 2013, Salafi figures and preachers from Sinai held a public conference in Sheikh Zuweid; one of the speakers demanded the formation of a “war council” to fend off an expected wave of repression.

After the crackdown in Rabaa Square, there was a significant change in the insurgency’s rhetoric, behavior, intensity, and scale of operations, as well as in its overall narrative and goals. “Morsi admitted leading the campaign against us. But [at that time] the reply of our brothers was limited to defense. We did not deliberately attack military headquarters or follow the security officers to target them. But after what happened after the military coup, fighting the armed forces became an urgent necessity,” said an ABM member in a rare interview.¹² Indeed, ABM was highly sensitive to the local developments. It changed its rhetoric and narrative primarily to stress the idea that it is “defending the Muslims of Egypt against the onslaught of an ‘Army of Apostates.’”¹³ This is a significant departure from the narratives of 2010–12, when the organization stressed that it was targeting Israel and its interests, while attempting to avoid a clash with the local military.

The November 2014 pledge of allegiance by ABM/WS – or most of its factions – to ISIS was perhaps the most critical and unprecedented development in the history of Egyptian jihadism. It was the first time that a local armed jihadist organization of ABM’s size declared transnational

loyalty to a foreign organization. As previously mentioned, the signs of inclination towards ISIS were clear from early 2014, despite a January 2014 message by al-Qaida's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in which he described ABM as "our men in Sinai." Unconfirmed reports circulated that Kamal Allam and several other men from Sinai joined or trained in ISIS and/or Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) camps in Syria in 2013. Other reports mentioned that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi met with some of the jihadists from Sinai who fought in Iraq. He was interested in providing logistical support to them as early as 2011.¹⁴ In September 2014, ISIS's official spokesperson, Abu Muhammed al-Adnani, called on the "brothers" in Sinai to fight the incumbent's army "in any possible way and to turn their lives into hell and horror." Two months later, ABM had publically announced its affiliation with ISIS and changed its name to WS.

Wilayat Sinai's Military Capacity: Local, Regional, and International Impact

In November 2015, WS issued its first annual review of military operations, reflecting both a common trend of ISIS "provinces" and mirroring the practice of regular militaries. WS claimed that from October 25, 2014 to October 15, 2015 (corresponding to the Islamic lunar year of 1436) it had killed more than a thousand pro-regime elements, ranging from army and police officers and soldiers to local tribesmen accused of being "informants." It also claimed to have destroyed more than 140 tanks and armored vehicles and to have razed 30 military/police headquarters and houses of alleged informants. The statistics were listed under six categories: "Hunters of Armored Vehicles," "Targeting Individuals," "Incursions and Destroying Headquarters," "Demolishing Forts," "Special Operations," and "Spoils of War."¹⁵

According to the WS statistics, the organization relied heavily on improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to destroy armored vehicles. These include 24 American-made M-60 tanks, 17 M-113 armored vehicles, and 17 Hummers.¹⁶ To a lesser extent, WS used Russian-made "Kornet" anti-tank guided-missiles and unguided RPG-7 missiles to destroy 7 tanks and armored vehicles.¹⁷ The organization claimed that it has assassinated 130 civilians accused of being "informants." But most of the damage done by WS was listed under the category "incursions": complex guerilla operations spearheaded by one or more suicide bomber(s) attacking security and military checkpoints and headquarters. The alleged death toll resulting from these operations was over 800 soldiers.¹⁸ In terms of "spoils," the organization was able to capture heavy and

light weapons from the regular forces and showed some of them in its propaganda videos. Captured weapons in 2015 included heavy mortars (120-mm), two ZU-23 anti-aircraft autocannons (25-mm), five DShK heavy machine guns (14.5-mm), and over fifty AK assault rifles.¹⁹ The disturbing data is not too far from the reports published by the few remaining local journalists and, in some cases, some of them match the attacks officially declared by the military spokesperson.

As in other ISIS "provinces," the publications of WS's military metrics and reports occur on a monthly and annual basis. In January–February 2016 (corresponding to the lunar month of Rabi' Thani), WS issued its monthly "harvest of military operations," declaring the alleged destruction of 25 armored/vehicles (including tanks, minesweepers, and bulldozers) and the alleged killing of over 100 soldiers.²⁰ This was done via an overwhelming reliance on IEDs (59 percent of the operations), followed by guerilla attacks (20 percent), and then by snipers (12 percent). The rest of the fatalities were due to close-quarter assassinations of commanders and informants (9 percent).²¹ In the summer of 2016, WS was able to capture a tank and two armored vehicles. Its elements were shown maneuvering with the captured tank in a propaganda video released in August 2016, and entitled "Desert Flames."

That military capacity and the mere ability of WS to survive after some five years of military campaigns and security sweeps is puzzling for several reasons. First, geographically, Sinai's northeastern coastal terrain is not rugged. Most of the high mountains such as the peaks of Mount Catherine and Mount Sinai are in the south of the peninsula, far away from the bulk of the insurgency. Clashes occurred in the Halal Mountain in central Sinai, but it is not the main theater of operations. Second, Sinai's population is relatively small. North Sinai Governorate has a population of 434,781 (40 persons per square mile). Most of the armed action happens in three out of its six districts: El-Arish, Sheikh Zuweid, and Rafah (all mainly flat coastal districts on the Mediterranean), with a total population of about 300,000. Third, loyalty seems to be divided within this relatively small population. Almost every northeastern tribe and clan has members and supporters of the insurgency, but it also has supporters, informants, and pro-incumbent armed tribesmen. The divisions do not follow clear rural-urban, settler-bedouin, tribal, or administrative lines. Each of these categories has elements on both sides. Finally, there is no state sponsorship for the insurgents. None of the region's governments are directly or systematically supportive of its elements, including the Hamas authorities in Gaza. On the other hand, the regime's military forces alone enjoy

an estimated 500:1 power ratio, at the very least.²² This is in addition to the support provided by the United States in terms of financing, training, equipping, and intelligence as well as the support provided by Israel in terms of intelligence sharing and tactical and operational coordination.²³

The insurgency has survived on the local, national, and regional levels, however, and it has done so for several reasons. These include the tactical and operational accumulative experiences and capacities of the insurgents (2003–present), the mediocre and indiscriminately repressive counterinsurgency and counterterrorism policies of the incumbents (1999–present), the socioeconomic policies toward Sinai and its repercussions (1982–present), the sociopolitical environment especially after July 2013, and, finally, the militarization of regional politics, its sustained escalation, and the resulting unstable sociopolitical environments. Here I focus on the last factor and what it means for the impact of ISIS on northern Sinai.

WS employs mainly three types of tactics and field operations, all very similar to those used by ISIS. The first are the common tactics of urban terrorism. These include attacks in cities and towns via a combination of car bombs, suicide attacks, and targeted assassinations. The second type is guerrilla warfare. Small, mobile units employ hit-and-run tactics on security and military targets. They are usually lightly armed and consistent in avoiding a prolonged direct confrontation with the incumbent's forces. Guerrilla warfare is not new to Egypt. It certainly precedes the establishment of WS. What is new is the quality of tactics and field operations employed by the insurgents in Sinai, which in many ways mimics the ISIS tactics in Syria, Iraq, and Libya but also mimics regular Special Forces tactics.²⁴ Since early 2014, WS has used a combination of heavy (120-mm) and light (60-mm) mortar artillery, guided and unguided surface-to-surface missiles, guided surface-to-air missiles, heavy machine guns, and snipers to cover the advance or retreat of infantry formations composed of tens (and in very few cases, hundreds) of militants. These irregular formations attempted to control territory several times, including the attempt on the town of Sheikh Zuweid in July 2015. WS controls several villages and stretches of land south of Sheikh Zuweid and Rafah.

Based on the pattern of operations in the last two years, WS seems to aim for a sustained engagement with the incumbent's forces in a long war of attrition. This is a textbook Maoist style of insurgency but very similar as well to some of the tactics used by ISIS in Iraq, especially the military units operating in Salah al-Din, Al-Anbar, and Diyala provinces. They rely partly on subversive tactics to lower the morale of the regular soldiers. This is done

through the sustained targeting of the regime's forces and the brutality of executing captured soldiers and officers, with the aim of destroying or undermining the soldiers' will, not necessarily their capacity, to fight. Like other ISIS "provinces," WS also aims to "blind" the regime's forces by targeting their local networks of informants, including informants protected in Cairo.²⁵ This is done regardless of the "informant's" tribal affiliation, and the list of victims include figures from the same tribes as the WS commanders.

Put together, this is a mild version of the ISIS strategy outlined in one of its guides, *Managing Brutality*.²⁶ Simply put, the tactics and policies outlined in that book focus on how to manage instability in a way that allows ISIS to exclusively capitalize and to prevent any other actor(s) from doing so (including for example pro-democracy activists and non-ISIS armed actors, in addition to pro-regime elements and status-quo forces). So far, WS is in the first phase of this strategy: still attempting to secure strongholds and not just survive within them. Unlike some of the other ISIS "provinces," WS has no conventional or unconventional capacity to win in military terms. It needs, however, to continue gaining support and resources to be able to stay in the fight.

But where do the resources come from and what is the extent of their connection to ISIS? Arming, training, and recruiting are the three most important pillars bolstering WS's military strategy. The regime's figures and supporters claim that Libya and Gaza are the sources of arms, and accuse Turkey, Qatar, Israel, and the United States of conspiring with the insurgents.²⁷ The alleged support from the latter four countries is mere low-quality propaganda, not supported by any credible evidence. In the case of Gaza, most of the credibly uncovered arms flow was from Sinai to Gaza rather than in the other direction. Whereas the flow of arms from Libya has been credibly established, many of WS's arms are in fact taken from the incumbent's forces during local attacks.

Given the fact that WS – so far – lacks any significant amounts of precision weapons (guided missiles, guided artillery shells, or an air force), it relies heavily on IEDs and vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs) to spearhead its attacks. For precision, VBIEDs are sometimes driven by a suicide bomber (there were 12 such operations in 2015).²⁸ Whereas suicide bombings were used in Egypt before WS, the enhanced capacity of IED-making and the immediate military capitalization on the damage caused by them are not only new but are a highlight of ISIS tactical advantages and military victories in Syria, Libya, and Iraq.²⁹ WS followed the pattern.

Given the importance of IEDs to WS's strategy, it is worth mentioning that the sources of IEDs are primarily local. Previous wars scattered landmines and artillery shells throughout the Sinai Peninsula. These are modified by specialists and reused as IEDs.³⁰ Quarries in the mountain also use explosive materials, which have been reportedly acquired by WS elements either by purchase (mainly from black markets via middlemen), cooperation (supporters, sympathizers, and/or revenge-seekers), or force (raiding). The latter are also modified in various ways.³¹

In terms of transnational connections, there have been quite a few established ones in Libya and Syria. A main link between WS and eastern Libyan jihadists was Lt. Colonel Hesham al-'Ashmawy and his group (al-Murabitun). The former Special Forces officer-turned-insurgent was responsible for training ABM units in 2014.³² He later defected with a small faction from ABM, protesting the organization's oath of loyalty to ISIS. 'Ashmawy was then based in eastern Libya and was accused of conducting attacks on military units stationed in Egypt's Western Desert. In Libya, he was allegedly involved on another front; ISIS in Derna wanted him dead for joining the Derna Mujahidiyyun Consultative Council. The latter is an armed Islamist coalition that successfully forced ISIS out of Derna to the outskirts in July 2015.

Links between WS and Syria have also been well established. "We came to you [al-Sisi] from the Levant," said one of WS's bomb makers in the propaganda video entitled "The Charge of the Supporters 2." Overall, WS draws its skilled military members from three categories: 1) the defected members of the Egyptian armed forces (including former Special Forces, Navy as well as Police officers)³³; 2) battle-hardened insurgents trained in foreign combat zones, including Gaza, Syria and Iraq and 3) persistent local insurgents, who accumulated significant experience both in combating the regular forces and in building logistical support networks over the last decade.

Given Egypt's counterinsurgency blunders, the policies of the current regime, and the overall repressive political environment, WS has no problems recruiting from both the Sinai Peninsula and the Nile Valley. Much local testimony reflects this. "In my village, we knew of five young men who joined the Ansar [ABM] in 2012. Now [in 2015], we think they are over thirty," said a local journalist.³⁴ The new recruits are usually given basic military training in Sinai. In February 2016, WS issued a report entitled "Silent Death," in which it announced the graduation of new recruits from what it called "Abu Hajar al-Masri Camp" in Sinai.³⁵ At least 13 masked trainees were shown in the report while training on urban incursion tactics

and conventional battlefield mobility with assault rifles, handguns, as well as hand-to-hand combat.

In addition to direct recruitment and training, WS has an effective spy network. "They are warned before the Apaches or the tanks reach their targets ... they have too many friends here," said another local.³⁶ This sense of grievance, bitterness, and even animosity toward the incumbent's forces is primarily a product of the counterinsurgency policies employed, and it is one of the most important factors in creating these "friendships."

Concluding Observations and Policy Implications

The crisis in Sinai is multi-dimensional, and it continues to evolve. Addressing it successfully requires a complex and nuanced counterinsurgency policy, especially in the mid-to-long term. Certainly, this involves a major departure from current policies, which are as intensively repressive as they are ineffective. Counterinsurgency literature has made the consequences of such policies all too familiar: nothing drives locals into the arms of the insurgents more effectively than wide-scale, indiscriminate, vengeful repression committed by an incumbent regime's forces, particularly when those forces are undergoing a crisis of legitimacy. The pillars of Egypt's current counterinsurgency policy undermine each other. The specific type of repression applied in Sinai is a strong disincentive to potential informants, collaborators, and supporters, while army propaganda, which consistently needs verification from other sources, is misleading and ineffective.

The deteriorating situation in Sinai affects Europe for various reasons that are already well known. These include threats to the stability of the region, to the 1979 Peace Agreement between Egypt and Israel, to the security of allies, and to ongoing efforts to counter terrorism and violent extremism. In the short term, European governments should urge the rulers of Egypt to undertake an overall policy change in northern Sinai. The first step would be to stop spreading negative media stereotypes about residents of Sinai. It also involves enhancing the credibility of the official statements and the sustainability of its policies in the region. This is essential to building stronger local intelligence and support networks. More reliance on such networks, in addition to better-trained and equipped special forces – while limiting the usage of heavy artillery and aerial bombardment in residential areas – will positively affect the overall objectives.

Europe should also urge the Egyptian regime to put in place a policy of "winning hearts and minds." A good place to start would be to provide appropriate compensation to

the residents of demolished homes and the owners of destroyed farms, and to acknowledge the “collateral damage” done by the military.

In the mid to long term, Cairo must stop treating Sinai as merely a threat to its geostrategic security. Europe can help convince military officials to revise and alter policies that are based on such assumptions. Moreover, aspects of the Sinai problem are rooted in Egypt’s overall crisis: its lack of national reconciliation, the extreme polarization of its current political environment, the absence of mechanisms for non-violent conflict resolution, the lack of security sector reform, and the structural deficiency in civil-military relations.³⁷ When it comes to Sinai, that civil-military deficiency relates specifically to the lack of oversight over national security policy formulation, its execution, in addition to the general lack of accountability when such policies fail or when they exacerbate a crisis.

A thorough revision of the military and security policies in Sinai has never taken place. The only open discussion of Sinai to occur took place during the brief transition period between February 2011 and June 2013. It did not yield any executive policy, and it died quickly following the coup of July 2013. This needs to change. In general, insurgencies, both those that are exclusively local or those with transnational links, do not pose a major

threat to legitimate, well-institutionalized governments that follow competent counterinsurgency practices. This is not the case in Egypt, where legitimacy is contested, institutions are corrupt, and counterinsurgency practices have been far from ideal. In short, Egypt’s failing counterinsurgency and counterterrorism efforts require significant domestic reforms and policy changes.

Finally, Europe’s involvement is needed on ethical grounds. Germany is the third biggest arms exporter in the world and the fifth biggest supplier of arms to the Middle East. Between 2002 and 2009, German arms manufacturers were permitted to supply the Mubarak regime with weapons worth more than 32.9 million euros.³⁸ As noted above, this was the time when the crisis escalated in the Sinai Peninsula. Germany now needs to ensure robust human rights vetting for all military aid and security assistance to the regime. It also needs to conduct full end-user agreement monitoring of German military equipment in the Sinai Peninsula.

Omar Ashour (@DrOmarAshour on Twitter) is a senior lecturer in security studies at the University of Exeter (UK) and an associate fellow at Chatham House. His book *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements* was published in 2009.

Notes

- 1 The speaker was probably Kamal Allam, one of the military commanders of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis/Wilayat Sinai (Supporters of Jerusalem/ Sinai Province) from El-Arish City. The paper quotes various audio statements, video statements, and social media posts by ISIS and WS. Most of these links were only briefly available online before they were removed.
- 2 See Helena Burgrova, "Insecurity in Sinai and Beyond: Why the Egyptian Counterterrorism Strategy is Failing," DGAPkompakt 1 (January 2016) <<https://dgap.org/en/article/getFullPDF/27538>> (accessed June 24, 2016).
- 3 US State Department cable (classified by DCM Gordon Gray), "Internal Security in Sinai: An Update," March 14, 2005. Text available on WikiLeaks, *WikiLeak Cable No. 05CAIRO1978* <https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05CAIRO1978_a.html> (accessed June 24, 2016).
- 4 Based on interview conducted by the author in Cairo, August 2012.
- 5 Zarqawi's group started with the same name (al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad) and operated under five other titles – al-Qaida in the Lands of Two Rivers, Mujahidin Consultative Council, Mutayyibin Coalition, Islamic State in Iraq, Islamic State in Iraq and Sham – before it became known as Islamic State.
- 6 Based on interview conducted by the author in Cairo, September 2012. The term takfir refers to excommunication of the "other."
- 7 Omar Ashour, *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements* (New York and London, 2009).
- 8 Allam was arrested in a security sweep in early 2003. He was imprisoned without charge or trial for about eight years in the notorious Abu Za'bal Prison (2003 to 2011). He escaped from Abu Za'bal in January 2011 during the January Uprising. He was subsequently accused of attacking El-Arish Police Station in 2011, before allegedly travelling to Libya and Syria in 2012. He was later seen in a military uniform in El-Arish City later in 2014.
- 9 Al-Tahwid wa al-Jihad – Bayt al-Maqdis, "This is Our Creed" [in Arabic], publication details unavailable, 2009).
- 10 This conclusion is based on several interviews conducted by the author with local journalists, activists, ex-military and security personnel, and Sinai-based Salafi figures between 2012 and 2015. Some interviewees estimated the number of different armed networks was as high as seven. However, it is more likely that the same network used different organization names at different times.
- 11 Based on a phone interview conducted by the author, September 2014.
- 12 "ABM: Sisi is an Apostate and We Are Continuing to Fight" [in Arabic], interview of an anonymous member of ABM by Mona al-Zamlout on the Al Jazeera network, May 28, 2014.
- 13 This was the title of a series of propaganda videos issued by ABM to document its operations in October 2013.
- 14 Hassan Abu Hanieyh and Muhammad Abu Rumman, *The Islamic State Organization: The Sunni Crisis and the Struggle for Global Jihadism* [in Arabic], Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (Amman, 2014). The author contacted one of the book's authors, who mentioned that the information is based on an interview he conducted with supporters of ISIS.
- 15 Media Office of Sinai Province (al-Maktab al-I'lam li Wilayat Sinai), "The Annual Harvest of Military Operations for the Year 1436" [in Arabic], November 12, 2015.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 The "Kornet" is a sophisticated anti-tank, laser-guided missile able to penetrate 1100 to 1200 millimeters of steel armor protector.
- 18 Media Office of Sinai Province, "The Annual Harvest."
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 The regular military statement only acknowledged the death of 27 officers and soldiers in January 2016.
- 21 Some of the names of the assassinated individuals were published in WS propaganda. See Media Office of Sinai Province, "The Harvest of Military Operations for the Month of Rabi' Thani 1437" [in Arabic], February 12, 2016.
- 22 This does not include the forces under the Ministry of Interior, which are also involved in combat, such as the Central Security Forces (more than 400,000 officers, soldiers, and conscripts).
- 23 See Inna Lazareva, "Israeli Minister Embarrassed after Revealing Security Co-operation with Egypt," *Daily Telegraph*, February 7, 2016 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/12145287/Israeli-minister-embarrassed-after-revealing-security-co-operation-with-Egypt.html>> (accessed June 24, 2016).
- 24 Some elements of ABM/WS were defectors from the regular army, most notably Lt. Colonel Hesham al-Ashmawy, Major Emad Abd al-Halim, and Captain Ahmed Amer.
- 25 The most recent case is that of Khaled al-Menei, who was assassinated in Cairo in September 2015. He is one of the well-known pro-military figures from al-Sawarka tribe and a relative of WS commander Shadi al-Menei.
- 26 Abu Bakr Al-Naji, *Managing Brutality* [in Arabic], publication details unavailable, 2007.
- 27 See for example, accusations made [in Arabic] by General Rafiq Habib, the former deputy minister of interior, about the United States and Israel on an Al Jazeera program aired on August 20, 2015 <http://youtu.be/g0sMOF_IxYk> (accessed June 24, 2016).
- 28 Media Office of Sinai Province, "The Annual Harvest of Military Operations for the Year 1436" (see note 15).
- 29 Omar Ashour, "Why does the Islamic State Endure and Expand?" IAI Working Papers 15 (December 2015) <<http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaiwpl552.pdf>> (accessed June 24, 2016).
- 30 WS has had significant losses from the modification process. The shells and the IED-making process is quite volatile. Some accidentally explode in the preparation phase, causing dozens of deaths among insurgents. See Mohamed Soliman "The Secret World of Explosives" [in Arabic], *Al-Araby*, January 4, 2016.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 "Who is Officer Hesham 'Ashmawy the Commander of the Murabitun in Egypt?" [in Arabic], *Noon Post*, July 23, 2015.
- 33 "The Army and Extremist Groups" [in Arabic], al-Araby Television Network (Bi Tawqet Misr), April 9, 2015 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THfzFzafqSM>> (accessed June 24, 2016).
- 34 Phone interview conducted by author, July 2015.
- 35 "Silent Death: The Graduation of New Cadets from the Camp Sheikh Abu Hajar al-Masri" [in Arabic], Al-Anba' Islamic Network (Wikalat al-Anba' al-Islamiyya), February 9, 2016. Russia Today also reported on the camp on its Arabic website on February 7, 2016 <<https://arabic.rt.com>>.
- 36 Phone interview conducted by author, August 2015.
- 37 See Omar Ashour, "Collusion to Crackdown: Islamist-Military Relations in Egypt," Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper 14 (March 2015) <<http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/03/10-islamist-military-relations-in-egypt-ashour/collusion-to-crackdown-english.pdf>> and Omar Ashour, "De-Radicalization Revisited," *Washington Post*, February 18, 2015 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/02/18/deradicalization-revisited/>> (both accessed June 24, 2016).
- 38 Jonathan Moremi, "Germany Arms Exports to Egypt, Saudi Arabia and UAE Raise Harrowing Questions," *Daily News Egypt*, March 11, 2015 <<http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2015/03/11/germanys-arms-exports-to-egypt-saudi-arabia-and-u-a-e-raise-harrowing-questions/>> (accessed June 24, 2016).

